

## **How Are the Division of Labor in Couples, its Fairness Perception, and Relationship Quality Interrelated?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the interrelationships between couples' division of labor, their perceptions of fairness, and relationship quality over the course of a relationship. It has been argued that gender equality and fairness assessment in the family tend to increase relationship stability. Family researchers have devoted much effort to understanding this relationship, but surprisingly few studies have addressed the issue longitudinally, and even fewer have examined within-individual variation over time. Based on the assumptions of exchange and equity theories, we hypothesize that a perceived division of labor is key to a mutually beneficial relationship, even more so than the actual division of labor. Using the six most recent waves of data from the German Family Panel (2016/17-2021/22), we are able to follow respondents in cohabiting relationships over the course of their relationship. Relationship quality is measured as self-rated relationship satisfaction. The main explanatory variables are the division of housework and paid work, as well as the perceived fairness of the couple's division of labor. We use fixed-effects regression models in a structural equation framework to analyze the interrelationships among the measures of the focal variables. This allows us not only to control for all time-invariant variables, but also to test whether the relationship between partnership quality and perceived fairness of the division of labor is bidirectional. So far, our results suggest that changes in (in)equality and (in)equity in the division of labor affect relationship satisfaction to a lesser extent than expected. There is evidence that an increasing sense of unfairness in the division of labor and declining relationship satisfaction are closely intertwined only among women.

## Introduction

The two most prominent theories that attempt to link gendered developments and family outcomes are the “gender revolution framework” (Goldscheider et al. 2015) and the idea of multiple equilibria (Esping-Andersen/Billari 2015). These two theories of modernization operate at the societal level and point to a new stage of social development. Of course, there must be changes at the individual level to fulfill the theoretical assumptions.

Individual-level explanations of family outcomes sometimes use cross-sectional designs and are thus unable to disentangle cause and effect. Previous research tends to focus on fertility-related outcomes rather than on relationship stability. Longitudinal research often concentrates on a particular life stage, frequently on the transition to parenthood. We want to take a more general approach and answer the following research questions: How do changes in (in)equality and (in)equity in the division of labor relate to changes in relationship quality over time? Are there notable gender differences?

## Theoretical focus

We rely largely on equity theory. Within this framework, gender equality and equity are two distinct concepts. Equity theory suggests that relationships are more harmonious when the exchange is perceived as fair. It emphasizes that inequality associated with perceived unfairness in social exchange can have adverse consequences and thus reduce one’s sense of interpersonal closeness in the relationship. Equity theory also asserts that compensatory contributions are central to the dynamics of equity in intimate relationships. An overall sense of fairness can be maintained when a partner’s smaller contributions in one domain (e.g., housework) are offset by larger contributions in another domain (e.g., paid work) (DeMaris/Mahoney 2017).

## Data & methods

Our study is based on data from the German Family Panel *pairfam* (“Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics”), a multidisciplinary, longitudinal study of partnership and family dynamics in Germany. We use the six most recent waves of these data (2016/17-2021/22).

Our sample includes all respondents from the birth cohorts 1971-73, 1981-83 and 1991-93 who were in a cohabiting relationship at wave 9 (2016/17). They are followed for a maximum of six years across all available waves as long as they remain in the same cohabiting relationship. Excluded are only respondents with unknown gender and those without information on relationship duration. The sample contains information on 1.581 women and 1.173 men over 12,175 person-years.

Relationship quality is measured as self-rated relationship satisfaction. The main time-varying explanatory variables are the division of housework and paid work, and the perceived fairness of the couple's division of labor. The focal variables were administered as CASI (computer-assisted self-interview), where the respondent can complete certain blocks of questions independently. It has been found that this interview mode reduces bias due to social desirability bias and improves the validity of the measures (Schumann/Lück 2023).

The longitudinal design allows us to focus on within-individual changes over time. We use fixed-effects regression models in a structural equation framework to analyze the interrelationships among the measures of the focal variables. This allows us not only to control for all time-invariant variables (whether observed or not), but also to test whether the impact of the predictor variables on relationship quality varies over time. This is particularly important given that our most recent waves of data cover the Covid-19 pandemic period.

**Preliminary results** (not including the last wave of data yet)

We show a few descriptive results and some initial regression findings.

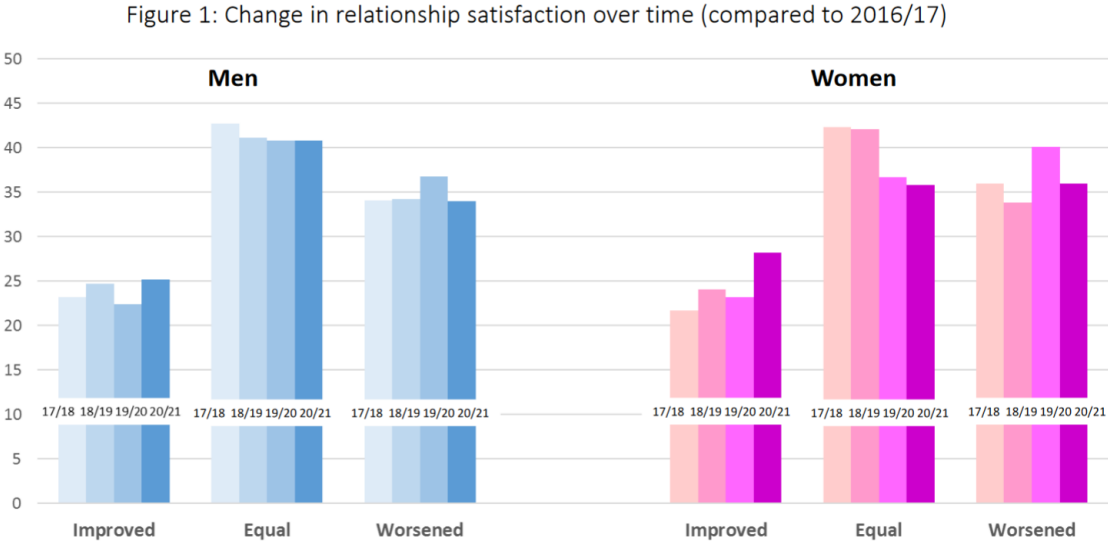


Figure 1 shows that relationship satisfaction is somewhat more stable for men than for women. Relationship satisfaction is more likely to decline than to improve over the course of a relationship.

Figure 2: Share of housework, paid work and fairness perception, by gender

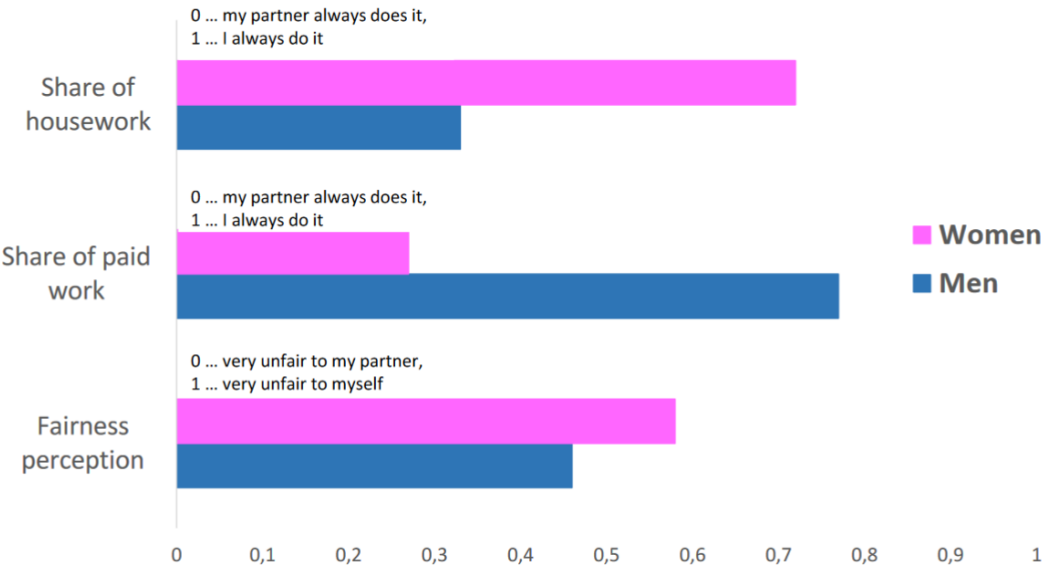


Figure 2 shows the gendered division of housework, of paid work, and perceptions of its fairness among women and men. Women report that they do much more housework than their partners, while men contribute significantly more working hours. Overall, women are more likely than men to perceive the division of unpaid and paid work as unfair to themselves. Women are also slightly more likely than men to experience an increase in this sense of unfairness over time.

Table 1: Fixed-effects regression results

Effects on Relationship Satisfaction		
	Men	Women
Perception of unfairness	-0.591	-1.098 ***
Housework inequality	-0.432 *	0.011
Inequality in paid work	-0.092	-0.017
Kids in household	-0.170	-0.451 ***
Marriage	0.175	-0.036
Effects on Unfairness Perception of the Division of Labor		
	Men	Women
Relationship satisfaction	-0.0003	-0.008 ***
Housework inequality	0.143 ***	0.148 ***
Inequality in paid work	-0.029 **	0.0042
Kids in household	-0.016	-0.009
Marriage	-0.024 *	0.013

Simple fixed-effects regressions (without SEM, Table 1) reveal, among other things, that an increasing sense of unfairness in the division of labor has a strong negative effect on women's relationship satisfaction only. However, it is also the case that women who become less satisfied with their relationship over time tend to perceive their division of work as unfair. Further analysis confirms that an increasing sense of unfairness in the division of labor and declining relationship satisfaction are closely linked only among women. This raises the question of whether Germany is stuck in the first stage of the gender revolution.

In a next step, we want to refine our analyses within the structural equation framework and complement our analyses with the latest wave of data.